

The Smile

Program note

The Smile was completed in January, 2001. Its title refers to a smile which was smiled by Mordechai Gebirtig, the celebrated Jewish-Polish folk musician and poet who lived in Krakow during the first half of the last century. Gebirtig is the subject of an opera I am currently writing (called The Memory Game), and the orchestra piece being played this evening shares a great deal of material with the opera.

Essentially, the scene is this: It is June of 1942 in the Jewish ghetto of Krakow. Gebirtig, along with a few other Jewish men, is being escorted by Nazi guards from his neighborhood towards a train depot, from which he knows he will be taken to one of the camps, probably Auschwitz, which lies 60 kilometers away. Gebirtig was famous for his extroverted behavior--he often sang and danced in the cafes and he was well-known in Krakow and Warsaw in his younger years as a talented actor and director in the Yiddish theater. Gebirtig was even famous for his smile. But now he is 65, and his songs and poems depict both the lost joys of his youth as well as the current conditions of the Jews of Krakow. His life (just like that of his fellow inmates in the ghetto) has become a nightmare. He had been expecting to be deported from one day to the next. At some point during the forced march, Gebirtig begins to smile. But it is of course not a smile of joy--he smiles out of desperation. He cannot do anything else but smile. It's really more of a grin than a smile. A guard approaches him and asks what is so funny. All Gebirtig can do is grin even more--he is completely terrified. The guard becomes enraged and shoots him on the spot. The rest of the prisoners are quickly induced to continue their march and Gebirtig lies in the street, dead.

The scene described above is one of the last scenes of the opera. But it is the entire focus of this orchestral piece, which attempts to penetrate the emotional world of this man during the final day of his life. The Smile was commissioned by Hebrew Union College in commemoration of its 125th anniversary. It is dedicated to Jesus Lopez-Cobos in honor of his last year as Music Director of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra.

Joel Hoffman